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The Philippine problem

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THE
PHILIPPINE PROBLEM

By

JOSEPH HENRY CROOKER

PRICE, 3 CENTS



NEW YORK
The Tucker Pub. Co.

Edward Dewey, 1900



The Philippine Problem



By

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Of Ann Arbor



Office of Publication :

Rooms 2128-29-30-31, Park Row Building

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THE PHILIPPINE PROBLEM.¹

I wish to discuss briefly certain phases of what may be called the Philippine problem. It is a problem of vast importance, and yet it has not been treated as fully as its great magnitude and inherent difficulties deserve. One of the alarming indications of the hour is the popular unwillingness to admit that these new policies present any serious problem. There seems to be no general recognition that anything strange or dangerous is happening. Those who raise a cry of warning are denounced as pessimists; those who enter criticism are branded as traitors. We are told in a jaunty manner to have faith in the American people. This blind trust in "destiny" makes the triumph of the demagogue easy. This indifference to political discussion is the symptom of the paralysis of true patriotism.

I.—INTRUDED VS. NATIVE ANARCHY.

The following is one phase of the popular argument in justification of our oriental aggressions: The obligations of humanity demanded that we take possession of the Philippine islands, in order to prevent the anarchy which would certainly have followed had we taken any other course than that which we did.

But would a little native-grown anarchy have been as bad as the slaughter and destruction which we have intruded? Let us remember that we ourselves have already killed and wounded thousands of the inhabitants. We have arrayed

¹ Originally printed in the Springfield (Mass.) "Republican."

tribe against tribe; we have desolated homes and burned villages; agriculture and commerce have been prostrated; and, finally, we have created hatred of ourselves in the breasts of millions of people, to remain for years to plague us and them. It is not likely that, if left to themselves, anything half so serious would have occurred. It is perfectly clear that some other attitude toward those islands besides that of domination, which this nation most unfortunately took, would have prevented these results.

And we are not yet at the end. Recurring outbreaks against us as intruders, by people desirous of independence, will undoubtedly produce more distress and disorder in the next ten years (if our present policy is maintained) than would have resulted from native incapacity. Moreover, there are no facts in evidence that warrant the assertion that anarchy would have followed had we left them more to themselves. This is wholly an unfounded assumption. It would certainly have been well to have waited and given them a chance before interfering. That we did not wait, that we did not give them a chance, is proof positive that our national policy was not shaped by considerations of humanity or a reasonable desire to benefit them, but by a spirit of selfish aggrandizement.

II.—PROTECTION BETTER THAN POSSESSION.

It is held that we had to do just what was done, to prevent the Philippines from being seized by some greedy European power. And it is taken for granted that such an outcome would have been disastrous to them and injurious to us.

This is, however, a dangerous mode of argument. It is the defence of a questionable procedure by a succession of colossal assumptions. In the first place, it is a mere assump-

tion to hold that harm would have come to America if a European power had taken possession of them. Has the French dominion in Madagascar injured the United States? Such views show a strange misconception of the sources of our national greatness, far more damaging to us than any foreign occupation of Manila!

Let us suppose that some greedy European power had taken possession of them. Would European greed have done them any more harm than American greed? Is it likely that German bullets would have killed any more than American rifles? Remember the sickening daily record: 10, 50, 200 rebels killed! Has our policy so far justified itself as a philanthropic measure? If we carry out the frank declaration of our congressmen, that we need these islands for their commercial advantages, how will we stand before the bar of historical justice,—as a chivalrous nation or as a despicable Shylock?

But such arguments are needless. We should have been far more able to protect them from European aggression, if we had stood by them as a friend instead of standing over them as their master. Our vast power would have been more effectual, if used righteously as a protectorate than despotically in ownership. If we had said to the world: "Keep hands off; let these people work out their problem of independence," no nation would have thought of interfering with us or our protégé. We would have been stronger in defending them from aggression than in maintaining ourselves as aggressors.

III.—COMMERCE VS. CONSCIENCE.

It is claimed that we urgently needed just such a base of operations in the far East as the Philippines afford, to foster our commerce in times of peace and shelter our navy in times

of war. But is this a valid argument? Trade follows other lines besides those ploughed by cannon balls. Look at our trade in Australia. It has no naval base of operations to support it. If this policy is wise and necessary, we must not stop where we are. This is only a mere beginning. We want to trade in China, Africa, Brazil. Therefore we must seize some territory there to help our commerce. And where shall we stop, if we begin to foster trade by conquest? Our fathers thought that our chief concern as a nation was liberty. Shall we abandon those sublime political ideals and make barter the sole aim of our patriotism? Then we are free America no longer. Do the old soldiers and their loyal sons realize that the policy so widely advocated degrades the flag and makes of it little more than the sign of a market-place or an auction shop? They bore the flag through the smoke of battle to make it the symbol of justice and liberty. Shall we now rob it of all its glory by trailing it in the dust to mark the place where tradesmen may show their wares?

The subjugation of distant peoples to help our shopkeepers may be true Americanism, but it was not the Americanism of Washington and Lincoln, of Sumner and Garrison, of Lowell and Emerson. Men once said: "We must not touch slavery, it will hurt our business." And the names of those men are now covered with lasting disgrace. Men now say: "Let us conquer these islands to help our commerce." An equal dishonor will some day blacken the names of these men.

And what a sorry illusion we are chasing, when we enlarge on the importance of these distant lands! We have no business to plan for a war in the Orient. Poor business to strut about far from home with a chip on our shoulder, inviting international troubles. But, should war come, these ten million Asiatics, longing for liberty, would find in our troubles their

opportunity; and, instead of being a source of strength, they would be a menace and a weakness. We would be stronger with one naval station in those waters than with a dozen points to defend, where we might easily find ourselves caught between two fires.

Moreover, those who use the above argument are forever restrained and enjoined from a pretence of acting from motives of humanity. From lips blistered by such unpatriotic and inhuman selfishness no plea for the rights of man can come. And, as events forcibly illustrate, the more this hateful doctrine is advocated by our congressmen, the more soldiers will be needed in the Philippines. These are the words that will nerve those distant islanders to resistance. On the hands of the supporters of such commercialism rests the blood, not only of so-called rebels, but also of American soldiers. He really aims the gun at our boys in blue who makes the gunner feel that we want to rule him to help our trade.

IV.—WHOSE FINANCIAL GAIN?

It is pitiful that our people, and especially the common people, should be so carried away by wild and baseless dreams of the commercial advantage of these islands. It is bad enough to sacrifice patriotism upon the altar of Mammon; but it is clear that in this case the sacrifice will be made without securing any benefit, even from Mammon.

The annual expense our nation will incur by the military and naval establishment in the Philippines will be at least one hundred million dollars. This the tax-payer of America must pay. On the other hand, the trade profits from these islands—from the very nature of the case—will go directly into the pockets of millionaire monopolists, the few speculators

who will get possession of the business interests there, in the line of hemp, sugar, tobacco, and lumber.

The proposition is a plain one. These islands will cost us, the common people, a hundred million dollars a year. The profits from them, possibly an equal sum, will go directly to a few very rich men. This is a very sleek speculative scheme for transferring vast sums of money from the people at large to the bank accounts of a few monopolists. Can any one see anything very helpful to the common tax-payer in this? This is a consideration—in addition to the competition of American labor with cheap Asiatic workmen—in itself sufficiently serious.

The question I press is this: Can such a policy work anything but financial harm to the average American citizen? For one, I do not care to pay this tribute money every time I draw a check or buy a bottle of medicine—tribute money that means oppression to those distant islanders, unnecessary burdens to our own people, and a still larger store for speculators to be used in corrupting American politics!

V.—WHAT IS “EXPANSION”?

A passionate demand for expansion has taken possession of the American imagination. It is contended, We must come out of our little corner, and take our place on the world-stage of the nations.

But what has been the real expansion of our nation for over a century? It has been two-fold: (1) The extension of our free institutions westward across the continent to the Pacific coast; (2) the powerful influence of our republican principles throughout the world. Our political ideals have modified the sentiments of great nations; our people have flowed over con-

tiguous territories and planted there the same civic, social, religious, and educational institutions that they possessed in their eastern home. All this has been a normal and natural growth of true Americanism.

The policy that now popularly bears the name "expansion" is something radically different; and it is in no sense the expansion of America. Our people have been sadly deceived by something far worse than an optical illusion; a deceptive phrase has lured them into danger and toward despotism. To buy ten million distant islanders is the expansion of Jefferson Davis, not the expansion of Abraham Lincoln. To tax far-off colonists without their consent is the expansion of the policy of George III., not the expansion of the patriotism of George Washington. To rule without representation subject peoples is not the expansion of Americanism, but the triumph of imperialism.

The policy advocated is the suppression of American principles, the surrender of our sublime ideals, and the end of our beneficent ministry of liberty among the nations. Just because I want to see America expand I condemn the policy as unpatriotic. Let us not deceive ourselves: the expansion of military rule and sordid commercialism is not the expansion of our real strength or true glory. Let us not mistake the renunciation of American ideals for the expansion of American institutions.

VI.—FLAG AND CONSTITUTION.

Wherever the flag goes, there the constitution must go. Wherever the flag moves, there the whole of the flag must be present. Wherever the constitution is extended, there the entire constitution must rule. If any one does not wish to accept these consequences, then let the flag be brought back to

the spot where it can represent true Americanism, and Americanism in its entirety.

If it does not symbolize American institutions in their fullness wherever it floats, then our starry banner becomes false to America and oppressive to those who may fear its authority, but do not share its freedom. Disgrace and harm will not come from taking the flag down, but rather from keeping it where it loses all that our statesmen, prophets, and soldiers have put into it. The only way to keep "Old Glory" from becoming a falsehood is to give all under it the liberty that it represents. Nowhere must it mean simply a power to be dreaded, but everywhere it must symbolize rights and privileges shared by all.

VII.—HOW THE POISON WORKS.

Among the many bad things bound up with this unfortunate business none is worse than the degradation of America, sure to follow in more ways than one, if we persist in the course that we are now following. No stronger or sadder proof of the unwise and harmful character of this policy is needed than the fact that its defenders are led so quickly to part company with sober argument and truthful statement, and rush into virulent abuse and deceptive sophistries. Who would have believed two years ago that any sane man would have appealed to Washington in support of a policy so abhorrent to the Father of his Country? What ignoble unveracity in twisting his words into the approval of foreign conquest! Who would have thought it possible that scholars and statesmen would so soon become mere jugglers with words, pretending that our previous territorial expansion furnishes analogy and warrant for a colonial system far across the ocean, entered upon by warfare and maintained by congress without

constitutional safeguards? These facts show how virulent a poison is at work upon the national mind. We have here already a perversion of patriotism and a loss of political sagacity and veracity.

It is bad enough to hear men exclaim: "There is money in it, and that is sufficient"; but a national venture that leads men to scoff at the Declaration of Independence, to ridicule the constitution as outgrown, to denounce the wisdom of the fathers as foolishness, and to declare that American glory dates from Manila bay—is there not something ominous in such talk? If a brief experience in the expansion of America that scoffs at American principles produces such results, is it not time to sound the alarm? If the defence of a policy compels men to take such positions, there is something infinitely dangerous in that policy.

VIII.—UNWORTHY FATALISM.

There are those who supinely fall into national fatalism, and exclaim: "We were compelled against our own will to take possession of those islands." "They fell into our unwilling lap." "They were forced upon us by Destiny."

What a strange thing it is to hide so ignominiously behind Providence! How convenient, but how unmanly, to shirk our responsibility, and say: "We did not mean to buy and kill, but forces over which we had no control pushed us into it." But is it manly to renounce our responsibility? Is it honest to misrepresent the situation? Is it patriotic to hide behind a pious phrase? Must we admit that we are a lot of brainless and heartless irresponsibles?

Where shall we stop if we allow our statesmen to practice such subterfuges? This means the destruction of responsible government. Shall we in this scientific age renounce reason

and conscience, and play the baby act by crying: "I did not do it; it was the other fellow"? But what are the facts? Did God or our president instruct our commissioners at Paris to lay hands on everything in sight? Did God or our president write the proclamation of December 21, 1898, calling on ten million people to submit to our authority, with threat of punishment if they resisted, but with no promise to consider their wishes,—six weeks before the treaty was ratified by the senate, when, as since admitted, he had no authority for such an act? When General Miller a few days later received directions to bombard Iloilo, if necessary, who wrote the command.—Providence, or a military representative of our government? That was the real beginning of the war: there was the clear intent, if not the overt act. The successive steps in this whole transaction were the acts of men, for which it is childish to hold Destiny responsible. We were as a nation perfectly free to have taken any one of a dozen other courses. If the impelling motive had been the good of humanity,—a real desire to do the best for the Philippines,—this is the last policy that would have been adopted.

This little lambskin of fine phrases about Providence and civilization is scant covering for the wolfish greed that everywhere obtrudes in talk about trade and commerce. We are told that God commanded us to take possession of these islands to help humanity. By parity of reasoning every iniquity ever committed may be made to shine in white, as a beatitude. How pious it all sounds: "We needed these islands to advance the cause of civilization." And in the same breath we gloatingly exclaim: "They will enrich us beyond the dreams of Cræsus." Certainly no one is deceived by phrases stamped with pious emblems, but coined of base metal in the mint of rapacious greed. Least of all will those

islanders be deceived by these phrases. The more we publish them, the more we sow the Orient with dragon teeth.

IX.—OUR PRESENT DUTY.

It is the fashion of the hour to say: We do not want criticism of what has been done, but description of what is best to do now. The past is behind us; that we cannot change. We must assume that certain things exist, whether for good or for evil. They confront us to-day. Let us push on and make the best of this bad business. Tell us our present duty. Make plain the path before us.

But in this case, as in many others, the necessary preparation for doing the right thing to-day is to realize that yesterday we did the wrong thing. Criticism of the past has not done its full service until it works in us a change of heart. We cannot well address ourselves to the future until we recognize that our present policy is unwise and unjust. We cannot mend our ways until conscious that our conduct is unrighteous. He who points out what is harmful in present methods opens the door to better methods.

Three courses lie before us: First, we can hold these islands as colonies and allow congress to govern them without regard to the constitution, providing the supreme court sustains such a policy. This means a colonial system, costly, vexatious, burdensome, and dangerous. If we elect to do this, let us do it with our eyes open. Every hour will make it clearer that this policy is in contradiction to our political principles, hostile to the genius of the republic, destructive of our best influence and noble pre-eminence among the nations, injurious to our own political life, and subversive of the best interests of the people so governed. Liberty enlightening the world is

a sublime figure; but Columbia ruling the people without their consent is an infinite shame.

Second. We can extend our constitution to the Philippines, and make them a part of our nation. This is the only meaning the phrase "benevolent assimilation" can justly have. This means that no trade restrictions be erected against them. Their products shall have free entry into our ports. Their custom-houses shall be barred against the world's trade the same as ours. Their people shall be free to settle anywhere in our domain, for where the flag floats there they shall be at home; a million, if they feel like it, may freely come to the Pacific coast, or settle in the "black belt" and intensify the negro problem. They must have their representatives in congress to vote on all matters pertaining to our national affairs. Their ballots must be counted in the election of a president. In our labor troubles, our monopolists will be able to import those islanders to supplant native Americans.

The Philippine people, if retained, must be either the one or the other; subject colonists, in contradiction to our boasted freedom, or they must, in the near future, be given equality of citizenship. Our territories have always been treated as States in the making. Our expansion, so far, has been a national expansion, the expansion of American principles and policies. We have never for a moment contemplated keeping a large body of inhabitants under a territorial form of government. When temporarily so situated, these people have been full American citizens with slight qualifications. To treat these islands as dependencies would be a radical departure from established national policies. If capable of self-government, it is a crime for us to govern them without their consent. If incapable of American institutions, our attempted assimilation of them will be harmful to them and injurious to us.

Third. Our people will certainly, in the end, favor neither of these policies. Before it is too late, the sober second thought of the average American citizen—the plain people in whom Lincoln trusted—will demand that we follow another course. The open way of wisdom and justice, which we ought to have taken at the beginning, is this: We ought to have made it perfectly clear that we would help them to self-government, assuring them that we would stay among them no longer than they needed us. We ought to have made it plain that we would lend them all possible aid to make them prosperous and independent; that our last soldier was theirs for protection against foreign oppression, and that our best offices were theirs to help them to peace among themselves.

If these things had been said and done at the beginning, there would have been no war. It is possible that the leader of the insurrection did not represent the people; but it must be borne in mind that we were so un-American that we never gave them a chance to show what they wanted! If, instead of demanding their subjection, after the manner of despots, we had, in the spirit of a true republic, offered our help and given them a chance, all this bloody business would have been avoided. All the trappings upon our own political principles would have been prevented. How much innocent blood unshed, vast treasure unspent, and national disgraces and dangers avoided! We should have kept them as friends. The flag would have had a glory that these blood-stains cannot give it. And even our commercial advantages would have been greater than they can ever now become.

Does some one say: "But they prevented all this by shooting our soldiers"? No, we prevented this by letting the weeks pass without making a single clear declaration of friendship. The solemn responsibility we must bear. We

virtually incited them to war by demanding their submission on threat of punishment. We treated them like people without any rights. We have not yet given them a single offer or pledge of self-government. We have not asked them what they desire. This indifference on our part to their wishes created a revolt that can be stopped the moment that we are loyal to our own political ideals. But even now we show our misconception of the true situation by boasting that our commissioners will soon impose on them a form of government similar to the one that they had already formulated. But if able to formulate it, why not give them freedom to operate it? Why not act in the American spirit, and ask them what they would like? This disposition to rule them to please ourselves, without reference to their wishes,—this created the war. This prolongs the strife. This violates our democracy and destroys their rights. This alone stands in the way of peace. Let us reassert our republicanism and extend justice to the Philippines by doing to-day what would have prevented all trouble if done at the beginning. The promise of friendly co-operation would then have been wise and just, and it would have maintained peace. Why not give that promise to-day, putting aside the unholy dreams of imperialism and rescuing our nation from impending dangers? Make it clear that we are their friends, not their conquerors, and all will be well with them and us. Our national honor cannot be increased by continuance in wrongdoing. Let us hope that this is what the American citizen will soon demand.

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